

MEDIA MEMBERS' EXPECTATIONS OF A HIGH-QUALITY SPORTS  
INFORMATION DIRECTOR

by

Michael Walsh

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**DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS**

of the thesis submitted by

Michael Walsh

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Director

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Michael Walsh, and they evaluated his presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

|                            |                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Shelley Lucas, Ph.D.       | Chair, Supervisory Committee  |
| Mary Frances Casper, Ph.D. | Member, Supervisory Committee |
| Laurel Traynowicz, Ph.D.   | Member, Supervisory Committee |
| Tyler G. Johnson, Ph.D.    | Member, Supervisory Committee |

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Shelley Lucas, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved by the Graduate College.

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** The traditional role of communications and media relations professionals within intercollegiate athletics has changed. The profession, often referred to as sports information, is making an effort to redefine its role within the athletics industry and be viewed more as a strategist than a practitioner. In order to advance the profession and each professional, research must be carried out to give individuals the tools to better support their institution's communications goals in a strategic manner, while also building the base of data-driven methods and best practices. **PURPOSE:** This study aims to define behavioral traits and methods of a high-quality sports information director (SID) in the minds of media members, while also pinpointing best practices. **PARTICIPANTS:** This study surveyed sports media members in the 10 top-30 media markets that have at least two NCAA Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools within 50 miles. **METHOD:** Participants took an anonymous survey with Likert-style and open-ended questions on Qualtrics, an online survey software. **DATA ANALYSIS:** Sums, frequencies and mean scores were calculated for Likert-response data. Responses from open-ended questions were highlighted and grouped based upon common themes that related to job functions and behavioral traits of high-quality SIDs. **RESULTS:** When media members described the most important job functions of an SID and explained what makes a high-quality SID, four clear themes emerged: access, accuracy, availability and advocacy. The results also revealed what media members consider to be the most effective methods of distributing information, as well as the

platforms they use most often to consume information. **CONCLUSION:** The results of this study provide a road map for current and future SIDs and media relations professionals in other industries by first providing an organizing philosophy of “Straight A’s in Media Relations: Accessibility, Accuracy, Availability, and Advocacy.” This philosophy reflects an integration of recognized SID behavioral traits and job functions, together with essential insights from the SIDs’ primary work partners: sports television and newspaper reporters. The “Straight A’s” should be incorporated into curriculum for sports administration programs in higher education and professional development training sessions in order to share these perspectives. The findings regarding media members’ use of new and emerging communication tools in comparison to the habits of SIDs implementing those tools offers an opportunity to devise a plan of action based on data. In that regard, this study serves as a contribution and small step toward one of the primary objectives of the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) Strategic Plan, which is to bolster the scholarly research and knowledge base related to sports information.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| CoSIDA | College Sports Information Directors of America           |
| FBS    | Football Bowl Subdivision                                 |
| NACDA  | National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics |
| NCAA   | National Collegiate Athletic Association                  |
| PRSA   | Public Relations Society of America                       |
| SID    | Sports information director                               |

## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW

A sports information director (SID) is a liaison between athletic departments and the media, whose purpose is to convey information about a university's athletics programs to the media. This study aims to define behavioral traits and methods of a high-quality SID in the minds of media members. A secondary goal is to find disparities between common practices of SIDs and methods preferred by media members.

### **What is an SID?**

The duties of an SID vary depending on the size of the athletic department. SIDs, also known as athletic media relations contacts, serve as press agents for their assigned sports programs. The foremost duties of SIDs are the production and publication of media guides and press releases; and working with in-house, local, regional and national media to maximize positive exposure of the university through athletics. Weekly releases that preview upcoming events are supplemented with informational packets—known as game notes. These publications serve as tools for all types of media from which to draw information and talking points. In my 10 years working in SID offices at three universities, the role has evolved despite perception lagging behind. The SID position should no longer be defined by providing box scores and statistics. An SID is often the publicist for his or her athletic department, setting the direction for communications plans and strategies. It could be argued the SID's foremost duty is to be responsible for the public-facing image of an athletic department.

This position is known by multiple names, varying by athletic department. In various literature and in researching different schools' athletic department web sites, the Sports Information Office may be referred to as Athletic Media Relations, Athletic Media Services, Athletic Communications, or Strategic Communications. Former College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) President Charles Bloom explained the shift in the industry that has created a change in titles.

The business has changed. It used to be media guides, releases and statistical information. It has really grown to where you want to manage the message. You want to promote the message of your institution and of your athletics department. It's getting relationships with all types of media. It's managing the content you have available. It's the web site, the teleconferences, the satellite feeds, your television shows. It's all about what you have to offer as a university, from the athletics side, that the SID, media relations person manages. (NCAA News, 2007)

Ten years later, the sands of the industry continue to shift and the titles and roles of SIDs have not landed on a consistent new approach. Dittmore (2017) penned an article for AthleticDirectorU.com, an online publication targeting professionals in collegiate athletics, in which he researched schools rebranding the sports information department with titles that reflect a wider array of skills. In the end, Dittmore theorized that the historic role of an SID no longer exists, but also that the lack of consistency between the branding and titles at schools he observed signaled a lack of clear direction for the industry.

In a sense, SIDs are the public relations professionals of an athletics department. Time is spent trying to pitch stories to media and carefully articulate messages sent out from the department (Moore, 1994). Helitzer (1995) and Grunig (1992) wrote that SIDs are similar to public relations practitioners with Grunig going so far as to say sports information departments should be one of the most influential groups in an organization.

SIDs' responsibilities also differ from the traditional public relations sector in that an SID actually produces media through such outlets as an athletic department's official web site and through social media, particularly for sports that do not receive a lot of coverage from traditional media outlets (i.e., television, radio and newspapers). The difference between sports information and public relations also lies in how heavily involved athletic communications professionals are with intercollegiate sport programs on every level. Instead of taking facts and figures generated by a company or group and determining how to best market and publicize that entity - a hallmark of public relations - SIDs are also charged with generating and recording those important facts and figures (e.g., won-lost records, team and individual performance statistics). More information about the daily practices of this profession will come after a thorough look at who is in the field.

McCleneghan's benchmark 1995 study of the sports information profession and its members determined the median demographic profile of the director of a department's sports information office. Of the 95 SIDs responding to McCleneghan's survey, the average director was a 38.5-year-old male with a bachelor's degree in journalism with a public relations emphasis. McCleneghan concluded SIDs are hardworking, committed professionals whose roles within present-day athletic departments must change to meet the new demands of college athletics and the media. Based on the responses from SIDs across the country, he determined the main concerns of the profession were a lack of respect from the management SIDs represent, budget cutbacks, and the emerging influence of marketing/business types in the decision-making process within athletic departments.

McCleneghan's study is more than 17 years old, but the concerns it presents are still being echoed throughout the industry. A more recent study by Swalls (2004) revealed SIDs perceive that they are laboring in an underrated profession. The professional organization aligned with sports information—CoSIDA—has published various articles and research in the past year expressing many of the same sentiments. One current working group within the organization states its objective is “to better prepare and equip athletics communicators to support institutional, conference and division-wide goals in a strategic manner” (Strategic Plan, 2008).

### **What is CoSIDA?**

CoSIDA is the College Sports Information Directors of America—an organization comprised of public relations, communications and information professionals in the collegiate sports industry. Established in 1957 after many SIDs felt the need to separate from the American College Public Relations Association, CoSIDA's membership surpassed 3,000 in the 2016-17 academic year. The association encompasses all levels of intercollegiate athletic departments in the United States and Canada. An annual convention has been held ever since CoSIDA's formation, providing opportunities for workshops, professional development and recognition.

Despite the 60-year history of the organization and incredible growth in membership, very little scholarly research exists about the profession, its people and best practices. CoSIDA has begun to undergo changes in philosophy and structure that aim to increase the amount of scholarly information pertaining to the industry and to bring the organization and its members closer to other arms of athletic departments and college campuses. To illustrate, John Humenik was hired in March 2008 as the first executive

director in the organization's history. Later that year Humenik and the CoSIDA Board of Directors finalized the Master Strategic Plan. Among the benchmarks to be achieved were advancing the profession, advancing the professional, and advancing the professional society.

Scholarly research on sports information is not a completely barren landscape, though. Dr. Clay Stoldt is the Chair of the Wichita State University Department of Sport Management and has amassed a wealth of professional and scholarly experience within the area of sports information. As an undergraduate student at the University of Oklahoma, Stoldt received his bachelor's degree in journalism. He went on to earn advanced degrees from the Norman, OK, university in sport administration (master's) and adult and higher education (doctorate). Before turning to higher education, Stoldt worked for media outlets in Oklahoma. He spent more than a decade at Oklahoma City University working in the athletic department and as an adjunct professor. His time in athletics included two stints as the school's SID. In 1998 he moved to Wichita State as an assistant professor where he has since ascended in rank in the Department of Sports Management. His academic work focuses largely on athletic public relations and sports information. Stoldt's volumes of research include more than 80 published and ongoing projects such as books, articles and presentations, many for or about the sports information profession. Among the projects most directly targeted at CoSIDA and its members is Stoldt's 2008 interview with Humenik, where the CoSIDA Executive Director explained his vision for the organization and profession and introduced the strategic plan.



In September 2012, CoSIDA made available a resource library on its web site. According to a press release announcing the unveiling of the collection, the CoSIDA Resource Library is designed to be a growing resource that provides best practices, articles, tips, tools and more for athletic professionals. With the potential of contributing to the volumes of information in the library, this study aims to advance the profession by providing an original study that can be used to identify methods of best practice, be a resource from which to draw ideas and methods, and provide a foundation on which other studies can be crafted.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of relevant literature regarding sports information and public relations provides a number of issues that underscore the significance of this study. CoSIDA has put in place steps it would like to take in breaking down the barriers that its membership faces when trying to establish its role within athletic departments and when individuals try to take on leadership positions in athletics. One key component necessary to assist in this process is research. This review of literature covers such issues as the organization's strategic plan, joining forces with athletic department administrators, working more closely with other departments of the institution, and challenges facing the sports information profession both presently and in the near future.

### **The CoSIDA Strategic Plan**

Based on a survey of sports information professionals in 1995, sports information is one of the most under-respected professions in college athletics (McCleneghan, 1995). By 2008, not much had changed except a sense of urgency within the profession. In March of that year, CoSIDA hired an executive director to oversee the organization's day-to-day operations and provide stability not afforded by the previous method of electing a new volunteer president each year. The newly-hired executive director, John Humenik, brought with him more than 30 years of experience in the athletics communications field and in 1993 was inducted into the CoSIDA Hall of Fame. One of his first charges as executive director was to develop a strategic plan and direction for the

organization and its members. Along with the CoSIDA Board of Directors, Humenik finalized the strategic plan in June 2008, and it was approved by the membership at the organization's annual convention in July of the same year.

More than nine years later, promise and optimism remain. CoSIDA established a formal relationship with the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA), and that was just the beginning of Humenik's strategic plan. The following description of this strategic plan is based on Stoldt's landmark interview of Humenik published in 2008.

Humenik laid out benchmarks for the first three to five years of the strategic plan's implementation. He wanted to achieve the following: evaluate CoSIDA's management structure; develop a marketing plan for the benefit of professionals, the profession and the organization; elevate and enhance the organization's standing and image in college athletics community; improve the self-image of professionals, profession and organization; concentrate on all aspects of career and professional development; find and develop methods of evaluation; establish an efficient communication plan to reach diverse constituencies; increase revenue generation for CoSIDA; increase visibility in college athletics community; and embrace the importance of convention and workshops.

The plan was developed with attention being paid to seven guiding principles: to advance the professional; advance the profession; advance the professional society; build and enhance the image of the profession within the college community; build and enhance the profession's image within its own professional society; significantly raise the profession's visibility within the college community; and make sure CoSIDA's decisions

positively support the strategic plan (Stoldt, 2008). Those principles were derived from the industry's growing disconnect from the leadership its members work with on a daily basis. Humenik explained that, "excessive amounts of work that routinely lead to 70-plus-hour weeks, the 24/7 news cycle and the growing misunderstanding of our role and value among senior management at the college level led me to firmly believe...that we simply had to put such a plan in place" (Stoldt, 2008).

One of the first major advancements after the implementation of the strategic plan was the organization's partnership with NACDA. The two groups announced February 10, 2009, a unique, seven-year affiliation that allows CoSIDA and NACDA leadership to discuss industry trends. The partnership has since been extended through at least 2022.

### **CoSIDA and NACDA**

Since 1957, CoSIDA has hosted an annual convention. Starting in 2013, the organization held its meetings and workshops in conjunction with the NACDA convention. The two organizations joined forces in 2009, with their respective Boards of Directors working together and meeting annually. Former CoSIDA President Justin Doherty wrote of the partnership's importance in an article for the NACDA newsletter. "NACDA's invitation to CoSIDA to establish a partnership between the organizations sends a strong message to our members that athletics departments do, indeed, want the advice, counsel and strategic thinking that communications professionals can provide. And our members are ready, willing and able to provide it" (Doherty, 2009).

According to CoSIDA's own strategic plan, the organization and its membership have become increasingly perceived within the collegiate athletics community at-large as an organization that has, subconsciously, distanced itself somewhat from the rest of

college athletics community and is primarily perceived as reactive, rather than proactive as it relates to dealing with appropriate issues. To illustrate, a large number of groups have long been affiliated with the NACDA convention prior to CoSIDA's recent partnership. NACDA's web site (NACDA.com) lists the following groups as affiliates: College Athletic Business Management Association; College Event and Facility Management Association; Division I-AAA Athletics Directors Association; Division II Athletics Directors Association; Division I Football Championship Subdivision Athletics Directors Association; International Collegiate Licensing Association; John McLendon Minority Scholarship Foundation; Minority Opportunities Athletic Association; National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics; National Association for Athletics Compliance; National Association of Athletic Development Directors; National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators; and National Alliance of Two Year Collegiate Athletic Administrators. Joining ranks with NACDA should raise the profile of CoSIDA and taking an active role at conventions, such as through research presentations, can help to bring CoSIDA to the front of administrators' minds and display forward thinking, thereby aligning with goals identified in CoSIDA's Strategic Plan.

### **Importance of "Having a Seat at the Table"**

A significant reason the CoSIDA Board of Directors felt a strategic plan was necessary was a growing misunderstanding of the role and value of SIDs among senior leadership in athletic departments (Stoldt, 2008).

As Doherty (2009) points out, it is the responsibility of both parties (SIDs and senior staff) to bring the external communications division of a department closer to the forefront:

If the communications person does not have a ‘seat at the table’ in terms of athletics department decision-making—then that individual is not giving all he or she can give to their athletics department and, conversely, the athletics department is not getting all it can out of its communications arm (p. 44).

Putting CoSIDA and its members in front of various members of athletic administration at the NACDA Convention is a step toward achieving a better and mutual understanding about the role of SIDs. The momentum cannot stop there. One of the next steps is research. Humenik called for advancement of the profession and a closer relationship with academics. Research will help with one of Humenik’s chief concerns: changing the culture of how people in sports communications need to be viewed and evaluated (Stoldt, 2008).

The issue of not having a seat at the table is a concern throughout the public relations profession (Berger and Reber, 2006). Their study determined public relations professionals do not serve as advisors, but more often simply as publicists or in-house journalists. Berger and Reber indicated the lack of influence is due to “organizational leaders who just don’t get it and professionals who just don’t have it” (p. 236). This study did not survey SIDs. Dittmore’s 2017 article stated SIDs have been stigmatized by the traditional title of sports information director, which itself implies a tactical role. He went so far as to say the SID title represents a position in which statistics and game notes are important and strategic communications to a larger audience is an afterthought.

In a 2008 interview with Stoldt, Humenik stated that SIDs and other members of the communications staff in athletic departments must be thought of in a strategic role, rather than simply a practitioner. He said when working with senior staff who have an “old school” approach to public relations and communications, the responsibility of the communications staff is to demonstrate the importance of adapting to the current and

changing state of communications in order for the athletic department to be successful. Those remarks are in line with Stoldt's 2001 study about athletic directors' perception of SIDs and public relations issues, which show an unwillingness of athletic directors to assign a monetary value to the role of SIDs. The athletic directors surveyed assigned a higher rating to their SIDs in the areas of technical skills (e.g., producing related materials, maintaining contacts) than they did in managerial skills (e.g., setting goals, mediating conflict and researching). Similar research in more recent years (Ruibley and Fall, 2009; Ruibley, Pratt, and Carpenter, 2016) back up the same findings. Humenik stated if either the communication staff or senior administration fails to advance the role of the communications office, that part of the department will continue to be left behind. Studies showing benefits of how effective communications efforts impact visibility and public opinion can provide ammunition for such demonstrations. This study will contribute to that knowledge base.

Bringing the sports communications arm and the athletic department as a whole closer to academics is a concept leaders in athletics see as vital. Echoing Humenik, the late, former NCAA President Myles Brand—who served as the keynote speaker at the 2007 CoSIDA Convention—called for athletic departments and sports information offices to work more closely with academic departments on their campuses. A big piece of that equation is research (NCAA News, 2007). As Stier (2009) explains, scholarly articles are vital to advancing the knowledge base and practical aspects of a sport management profession.

### **Playing a Role in Academia**

The challenge of developing more research in the field speaks to one of Humenik's eventual goals for the industry: "I think anything that can be taught that will help people who want to get into sports communications develop ways to 'define value' in the context of the college athletics enterprise would be a huge advancement for those of us in the industry" (Stoldt, 2008, 464).

CoSIDA, through its strategic plan, is also working to make sure the sports information profession is represented in academic areas focused on educating present and future athletic department personnel, such as sports administration programs. The strategic plan urges CoSIDA members to contact the deans of sports administration programs throughout the country and inform them that the organization and membership feels quite strongly that their programs need to better prepare future collegiate administrators with regard to the role and value of public/media relations and an understanding of the "communications field" in today's world of athletics. Furthermore, such programs should be teaching more knowledge and skills relative to these aspects, something that has not been the case and has thus resulted in many athletics directors who are not prepared to deal with or understand the importance of this part of their job and the role it can and should play (*Strategic Plan*, 2008).

An anecdotal review of numerous books and resources from sport management curricula show a glaring lack of information—or worse, misinformation—on the matter of media relations. To illustrate, in an examination of three recent sport management textbooks that appear on multiple course syllabi from sport management courses at colleges across the country, none include any reference to sports information or media



relations in the table of contents or index. Bill (2009), Hoye (2012) and Trenberth and Hassan (2011) all include a chapter devoted to sports marketing. Within these chapters on sports marketing, none mention the position of an SID. One textbook touches on media and its value to sports organizations, but focuses on teaching marketing professionals the basics of media exposure (Bill, 2009).

One sport management textbook series reviewed does include a volume on sports publicity. *Sports Publicity: A Practical Approach* is written by a former SID, Joseph Favorito (2007), and discusses sports information at length. The book reads as a how-to guide for prospective SIDs, however, and is not necessarily geared toward future administrators. The discussion on SIDs brings up the profession's place in athletics departments. In the chapter on publicity in collegiate athletics, Favorito explains in the second paragraph that the SID is often viewed as a lower-level position, secondary to the development of the university. The end of the chapter highlights one of the major issues facing the profession's immediate future: "growing and understanding how the SID role fits into the bigger picture of sports publicity is the greatest challenge the SID has as the role becomes more important in the revenue growth areas of most universities," (p. 115). In this chapter, Favorito also touched on the difficulty of monetizing the work of an SID and noted that this failure to assign a monetary value can lead to the job being overlooked. The same issue was raised by Patterson (1992) in an article about the business of communicating with the media, and it continues to be a hurdle to the profession.

The marginalization or invisibility of SIDs in textbooks dating back 20 years or more, as described below, may help explain the current knowledge of and status of SIDs

in athletic departments wherein staff may have been exposed to such books during their education. The textbook *The Management of Sport: Its Foundation and Application* (Parkhouse, 1996) touts itself as “the most comprehensive compilation of subject matter published to date for the sport management profession.” Yet, the text dedicates just three paragraphs to media coverage and three more to public relations. In a table listing employment positions available at college athletic departments, public relations and marketing are considered one in the same, wrongly conflating two different areas. In the book’s index, the terms sports information and media relations are nowhere to be found.

*Policy in Sport Management* (VanderZwaag, 1998), a textbook intended for classes in the growing field of sport management, also fails to mention media relations. One chapter, “Promoting Nonrevenue Sports in the Colleges,” discussed how marketing professionals can be a valuable asset to a department. An even older text written by VanderZwaag (1984) does list SIDs and provides descriptions of duties, qualifications and expectations. The SID’s job is described as procedural in nature, perpetuating the idea that the role is one of simply a practitioner. The dated information is difficult to lend much credence to, but it does provide some kind of starting point for what sport management students may be expecting out of an SID.

The 1995 edition of *The Ultimate Guide to Sport Event Management and Marketing* dedicates an entire chapter to television and media without mentioning the sports information profession (Graham, Goldblatt and Neirotti, 1995). This chapter includes sections on maximizing press coverage complete with checklists of steps to take. Geared toward sport event planners and marketing professionals, the chapter actually covers a great deal of what is expected out of SIDs at the collegiate level without

mentioning the position by name. Although this text is not exclusively focused on intercollegiate sports and sporting events, it contains enough reference to the collegiate setting that the absence of any reference to the position of SID is discouraging and a problem for the profession.

In contrast to the virtual invisibility of sports information in several sport management textbooks, former NCAA President Myles Brand highlighted the significance of SIDs on college campuses in an interview following his 2007 CoSIDA keynote address. Brand talked about the dividends a well-devised communications effort out of the athletics department can pay for its university as a whole. According to Brand, it starts with SIDs: “There are a lot of misperceptions about the role of athletics on campus. And there’s no one better placed or more important to tell that story than the sports information directors, on all our campuses” (NCAA News, 2007). Brand said SIDs are in a position to explain where athletics fit in the context of higher education. He also indicated the other departments on campus should use athletics and SIDs as a vehicle to disseminate information. He advised that in this two-way approach, it is also the responsibility of SIDs to have relationships with other departments on campus.

In college (sports) the stars are the universities. It’s those whose students participate in athletics. So SIDs have to understand a lot about what’s happening at the university. They have to have open lines of communication. They have to work with the rest of the campus in order to get out those campus messages, of course in the context of intercollegiate athletics (NCAA News, 2007).

Brand encouraged athletic department personnel—namely SIDs—to also establish connections with other university employees. In addition to the benefits Brand spoke to regarding cross promotion and using various university platforms to push related messages, improved relationships across campus can help with some goals put forth by

CoSIDA. The strategic plan developed by Humenik and CoSIDA puts great emphasis on new research by and for its members. One of the organization's goals is to determine the best ways to use current and emerging communication vehicles to assist the organization and its professionals with all aspects of training, including continuing education (*Strategic Plan*, 2008).

The strategic plan highlights two specific methods of advancing the profession. The first is a call for professional development: "Closely study various aspects of continuing education as developed by the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) to determine possible adaptations with regard to CoSIDA," (*Strategic Plan*, 2008). The second noted opportunity is scholarly research. A long-term goal associated with this study is to develop and generate a data-driven knowledge base such that it is possible to structure future research to quantify the value of the sports information office to collegiate athletic departments. Additional research about the profession including required skills, job descriptions, perceptions by senior administration and desired behavioral traits, to name a few, will help build an inventory for explaining how SIDs benefit a department (*Strategic Plan*, 2008). Continued research of all aspects of the industry will not only help ensure the future inclusion and advancement of SIDs in the framework of collegiate athletics, it will establish a knowledge base from which sports communications professionals can draw from when determining methods of best practice.

Humenik proclaimed, "If you have a clear proactive plan and vision, and focus your decision making on it, you can make significant progress with regard to your goals and ambitions" (Stoldt, 2008). This study's intention of gaining an understanding of how media members wish to receive information from SIDs can help establish a clear,

proactive plan. A byproduct of this study will provide insight into the growing world of social and emerging media.

### **Emerging Media and Communication Tools**

An area in immediate need of research is the world of emerging media. SIDs have long been in the crosshairs of new media and old practices: television, cable networks, personal computers, the internet, email and, most recently, social media outlets have continually changed the methods and job descriptions of SIDs. These changes make for new challenges and important decisions to be made (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Humenik said the communications-based evolution we are living through provides SIDs with a great opportunity to change the way sports PR and communications are viewed and evaluated, especially by senior administration (Stoldt, 2008):

It is exciting for our industry and profession to be right in the middle of the greatest communications evolution in history. There is no question that ‘managing’ all of this is much more complicated than it used to be...this situation provides us with a meaningful opportunity to become leaders and architects in these discussions instead of mechanics and to thus demonstrate value and the impact of strategic thinking (Stoldt, 2008).

Research shows that work hours are already being devoted to new media (Stoldt, 2012).

Humenik’s call to action for the SID profession is to make that work a well-known part of the job.

Stoldt’s 2012 survey asking SIDs about their organization’s own use of social media revealed that more than 99 percent of respondents devote some time to working with blogs and other social media. Forty-one percent of respondents indicated social media consume 11-25 percent of their time, with another 25 percent reporting it accounts for even more of their time. A third of the study’s subjects said social media is 10 percent or less of their day. The same study showed the vast majority of respondents believe

social media have changed the way their organizations communicate (92 percent agree or strongly agree) and handle external communications (89 percent agree or strongly agree). There was also a strong indication that social media have enhanced the practice of public relations (81 percent agree or strongly agree). Most participants agreed or strongly agreed (92 percent) that social media and blogs influence traditional media. A large majority also agreed or strongly agreed (92 percent) that since social media have made communications more instantaneous, organizations are forced to respond more quickly to criticism.

An overwhelming majority of respondents from Stoldt's (2012) study agreed or strongly agreed that public relations practitioners should measure each of the following: the amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media; content of what's being communicated about their organizations in blogs and other social media; the impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on influential opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences; the impact information disseminated about their organizations through blogs and other social media has on formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Still, just eight percent answered "yes" when asked if their athletics department ever commissioned or conducted research measuring what members of other strategic publics have communicated about their organizations via blogs or social media. The results indicate there is a huge segment of research missing. This study will aim to fill in part of the missing information with opinions of media members regarding SIDs' use of social media.

### **Learning from the Public Relations Industry**

Research does exist in the public relations sector when it comes to behavioral traits of successful professionals and the use of social media. Zoch and Molleda (2006) determined a number of necessary qualities for media relations personnel, including crafting a message strategy designed to position the organization appropriately, targeting audiences that support the organization's mission and goals, using consistent messages and organizational spokespeople, and following up on media inquiries in a timely manner.

For those skills to come to fruition, practitioners must assess their relationship status with journalists (Lages and Simkin, 2003). This assessment includes reviewing how the organization was covered in past news stories, how the journalists previously responded to information subsidies, and how influential the journalist is in setting the agenda on a particular topic (Cho, 2006). Sallot and Johnson (2006) dug deeper to identify behavioral traits public relations professionals are deficient at, according to journalists. In a survey of 107 journalists, 74 percent reported public relations practitioners' lacked news sense, values, accuracy, timeliness, and presentation style.

Despite the apparent journalistic wariness of public relations professionals, research from the past 15 years across multiple disciplines shows a trend of recommending the use of media relations in business operations (Waters, Tindall and Morton, 2010). If leaders across all types of business are being urged to incorporate media relations practices as a way to help their organizations flourish, it can be expected for athletic directors to be subject to the same suggestions. It is important for senior staff

in an athletics department to understand that the SID office is the arm of athletic departments trained in and capable of implementing these tactics (Mayfield, 2002).

The explosion of social media has altered the way some of those standard tactics are carried out (Mulhern, 2009). The biggest change for public relations practitioners to adapt to is the new-age press release. Social media and web 2.0 advances have changed the look and function of press releases. Now with online mediums and an increasingly quick news cycle that relies on images and videos and other multimedia features, press releases are also a multimedia platform with embedded photos, videos and sound (Waters, et al., 2010).

Social media also presents a change to the journalist-public relations relationship. It allows a platform for easy two-way communication. No longer does story pitching end with a press release or a fax from a public relations practitioner to a journalist. Now reporters have open communication with organizations, which puts extra emphasis on the interpersonal relationships (Waters, et al., 2010).

The work of SIDs and their relationships with interdepartmental staff members and external constituencies fits within the framework of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory of publics. Grunig later (2006) said "the situational theory provides a tool to segment stakeholders into publics, to isolate the strategic publics with whom it is most important for organizations to develop relationships to be effective, and to plan different strategies for communicating with publics whose communication behavior ranged from active to passive" (p. 155).

This study will help to determine how closely aligned the SID-journalist relationship is to that of public relations professionals in other industries. It will also



provide a context, much like these studies do for public relations, for sports information and athletic departments specifically.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This research aims to determine which behavioral traits and methods are associated with and used by high-quality SIDs, in the eyes of sports media members—specifically those working in broadcast television news and newspapers. The study provides a framework from which sports information departments can draw an understanding of how these media members prefer to receive information and what behavioral traits they relate to high-quality SIDs. In addition, this research identifies differences between common practices of SIDs and methods preferred by media members.

The study was influenced by my 10 years of work experience in sports information offices at three different universities. In serving as a student assistant, graduate assistant, assistant SID, associate SID and assistant athletic director, I have witnessed change and growth in the sports information realm as well as collegiate athletics as a whole. I believe the changes currently going on in college athletics can offer an opportunity for communications professionals to grow beyond the constraints of the traditional SID position. This survey will help develop a framework from which SIDs can work to impact the overall strategic communication plan of his or her athletic department and university. The study will also contribute to the knowledge base that will ultimately advance the SID profession and the professionals.

### **Participants**

This study surveyed sports media members in the 10 top-30 media markets that have at least two NCAA Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools within 50 miles. Requiring multiple FBS schools in the targeted markets allowed respondents the opportunity to compare and contrast methods used by different SIDs within one school's department as well as methods implemented by different schools' departments. Participants were asked to reflect on the qualities of the SIDs they work with regularly and to tailor their survey responses to reflect the SID whom they consider to be of the highest quality.

Market sizes and ranks were based on the 2013-14 Nielsen local television market universe estimates. Distances between college campuses and their nearest top-30 media market were determined using GeoBytes.com's City Distance Calculator, which measures distances "as the crow flies" by the "great circle distance" method. The markets that fall into these parameters are (in alphabetical order) Cleveland, OH; Dallas, TX; Detroit, MI; Houston, TX; Los Angeles, CA; Miami, FL.; Nashville, TN.; New York, NY; Raleigh, NC; and San Francisco, CA.

Recipients of the survey were employees of local broadcast television stations with news departments and employees of the newspapers with circulations of at least 125,000 in each of the 10 markets. Employees at each news outlet were limited to those with titles of sports director (television) and sports editor or sports reporter (newspaper).

### **Survey Instrument**

The questionnaire included four demographic questions, six questions about the frequency and effectiveness of various methods of information distribution (e.g., email,

telephone, fax, twitter, Facebook, websites), two questions asking respondents to rank a series of options (e.g., effective communication skills, SID behavioral traits), one multi-part question asking how the SID-media relationship is expected to change along with technological advances—if at all, and four open-ended questions asking for a brief description of a high-quality SID. The six questions about information distribution included two additional Likert-scale questions to better understand the use of specific technologies and methods of disseminating information. The Likert-scale questions all had four options, a tactic employed in order to avoid neutral responses.

The development of the survey questions was facilitated through consulting a panel of 13 experts, all of whom are members of sports information offices at NCAA member institutions and current members of CoSIDA. This group was contacted via e-mail and asked, “If you had the chance to ask media members what makes someone good at your job, what would you ask them?” Their responses shaped the format and content of the survey. Questions were written by consolidating input from the panel of experts, my own experience as an SID and previous research on the topic. Demographic questions were guided by prior studies. Questions about the frequency and effectiveness of various communications tools were developed through the panel of experts, as were questions regarding media members’ use of social media. My own experience and informal discussions with members of the Boise State University Athletic Department led to many of the behavioral trait inquiries and open-ended questions. The survey was refined through consulting with my thesis supervisory committee to ensure the questions would elicit responses about the highest-quality SIDs each respondent works with.

The final step of constructing the survey was to run a pretest with local media members in the Boise media market. Boise is not one of the 10 markets included in the survey pool. The pretest allowed for feedback from individuals intimately familiar with the subject matter. The majority of this feedback led to further clarifying a number of questions and removing a question that was determined to be extraneous and not meeting the aim of the study.

To ensure confidentiality, respondents are not identified except by position (e.g., television sports director, newspaper sports reporter) in the reporting and discussion of the survey results.

### **Procedures**

The survey was sent to email addresses for all sports editors and sports reporters at newspapers with a circulation of greater than 125,000 in the 10 designated markets, as well as sports directors at local television stations with news departments in each of the same 10 markets. Survey responses were collected from April 28, 2016 until Jan. 27, 2017, soliciting responses at differing times of day, days of the week, and months of the year to allow for a population with non-traditional work hours and peak seasons opportunity to respond at their convenience. Follow-up emails were sent at periodic intervals as reminders of the invitation to participate. This study was granted exempt status by the University's Office of Research Compliance Institutional Review Board (#103-SB15-089).

### **Analysis**

Responses to the survey were analyzed with the help of Qualtrics, an online survey software program. Sums, frequencies and mean scores were calculated for Likert-

response data. Responses from open-ended questions were highlighted and grouped based upon common themes that related to job functions and behavioral traits of high-quality SIDs. Many of the survey questions asked respondents to consider how frequently various distribution methods are used by SIDs and the effectiveness of those methods. These questions were analyzed to determine how information is received, the effectiveness of each distribution method, how media members seek information, what information is sought by media members, the frequency and effectiveness of various communication tools, disparities between frequency and effectiveness of distribution methods and communication tools and which behavioral traits media members find desirable in a high-quality SID.

### **Limitations**

Since this study is among the first to survey, applaud and critique the work of SIDs, respondents may have been unsure how to approach the survey if they had not considered at length the nature of the questions. However, the survey was set up such that participants could return to the survey throughout the collection period, thus providing time for reflective and informed responses.

Another limitation was that participants work with multiple SIDs. While that is one of the key design features of the study, it may have been difficult for the participants and researchers alike to tease out which SID is most effective.

The survey pool was a very finite number of people and rather exclusive. Without offering an incentive to participate, the response rate likely suffered. A small sample size and low response rate can result in a response bias where “the responses do not accurately reflect the views of the sample and the population” (Cresswell, 2008, p. 403).

### **Delimitations**

Missing from the pool of respondents is the national media. Reaching the national media is an important task for SIDs to maximize exposure. Outlets such as *USA Today*, *The Sporting News*, ESPN and Fox Sports were not included in the survey. Another delimitation of the study is constraining the survey respondents to media members in general. Much can be learned from other constituencies and their perceptions of SIDs—most notably athletic directors and other senior staff. Those internal constituencies are better suited to answer questions regarding strategic communications and how best to serve the needs of the organization being represented. These are potential future studies that will also help to build the knowledge base.

The decision to survey media members from large media markets presents another delimitation. This population was selected to learn from media members who work with multiple SIDs presumably jockeying for coverage in large markets. Also, it is presumed that media members in large markets have worked in other markets throughout their career to reach their current position, thus exposing them to many more SIDs along the way. It is possible that media members in large markets may generally have relationships with SIDs that are less personal than their small-market counterparts. Best practices for SIDs working at schools in a large market or a market dominated by professional sports coverage may be different than those in a small market.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The following results are based on statistical and content analysis of survey questions. Of the 215 surveys distributed, 27 were completed for a response rate of 12.56 percent. Incomplete surveys were analyzed. Because not every participant completed every single survey question, the number of responses to each question may vary.

The primary goal of the research was to determine what methods are used by quality SIDs. A secondary goal was to find disparities between common practices of SIDs and methods preferred by media members.

### **Demographics**

All 27 participants identified as male, while 23 of the 25 (92 percent) who disclosed his age were older than 30 and 36 percent of respondents were between the ages of 41 and 50. Fifteen of the 25 respondents (60 percent) who offered their length of time working in the field said they had more than 20 years of experience. Journalism was the leading degree among the 27 participants, with 18 (66.7 percent) holding a college degree in journalism. The most common position title was “sports reporter,” with 18 of the 24 responses identifying as such.



**Table 1      Survey Participant Demographics**

|                                   |       |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| <b>Sex</b>                        |       |
| Male                              | 100%  |
| Female                            | 0%    |
| <b>Age</b>                        |       |
| 21-25                             | 8%    |
| 26-30                             | 0%    |
| 31-40                             | 28%   |
| 41-50                             | 36%   |
| 51-60                             | 12%   |
| 61+                               | 16%   |
| <b>Years in Field</b>             |       |
| 0-9                               | 12%   |
| 10-19                             | 28%   |
| 20-29                             | 32%   |
| 30-39                             | 16%   |
| 40+                               | 12%   |
| <b>Position Title</b>             |       |
| Sports Reporter                   | 75%   |
| Sports Director                   | 16.7% |
| Sports Editor                     | 8.3%  |
| <b>Undergraduate Degree Field</b> |       |
| Journalism                        | 66.7% |
| Business                          | 3.7%  |
| General Studies                   | 3.7%  |
| Advertising                       | 0%    |
| Public Relations                  | 0%    |
| Other                             | 25.9% |

### **How Information Is Received**

Survey participants were asked to consider eight popular methods used by SIDs to distribute information and answer whether SIDs they work closely with always, occasionally, rarely or never use each method. Email is the most frequently used method. Respondents said 96.2 percent of SIDs with whom they work either always or occasionally use email to release information, including 80.8 percent of respondents choosing ‘always.’

Respondents said 92.3 percent of SIDs always or occasionally use the athletic department's official website to release information. Media members reported 79.2 percent of SIDs always or occasionally use Twitter to release information, the third-most-often-used method. The use of Twitter to release information typically includes to posting information on department Twitter accounts, linking back to official athletic department websites for further information on an announcement or news release. Personal communication was said to be always or occasionally used by 65.4 percent of SIDs with whom they work, while always used by 19.2 percent of SIDs. Personal communication refers to one-on-one communication. This can be accomplished through personal emails, phone calls, text messages or face-to-face conversations. The remaining options (fax, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms) were always or occasionally used by less than 32 percent of the SIDs with whom participating media members work. Seven respondents (31.8 percent) said Facebook and Instagram were used with any regularity. Fax was the least-used method, said to be used rarely by 13 percent of respondents and never by 87 percent.

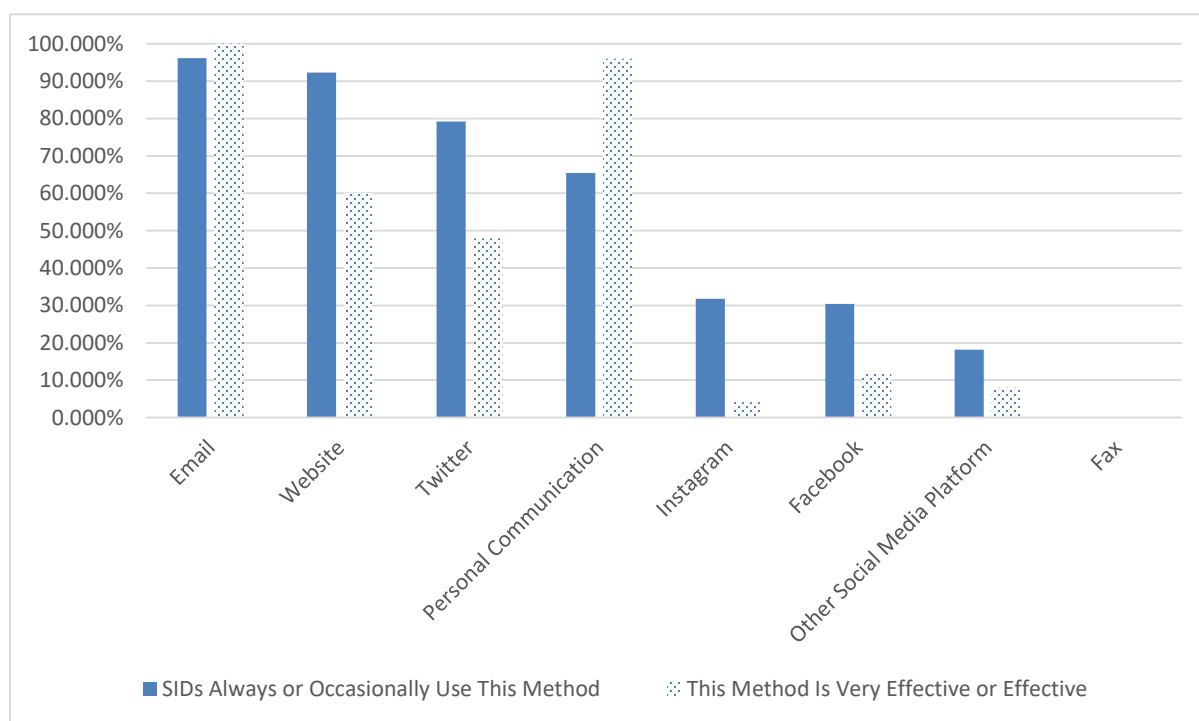
### **Effectiveness of Each Distribution Method**

Using a similar four-choice Likert scale, participants were asked to identify if each of the eight distribution methods were very effective, effective, somewhat effective or ineffective. According to the media members surveyed, two methods of releasing information are the most effective: email and personal communication. When answering, "how effective is each method SIDs use to release information?" 100 percent of respondents said email is either very effective or effective. Personal communication was

said to be very effective or effective by 96 percent of respondents. Personal communication received the most responses of ‘very effective’ at 84 percent.

Following the top two choices were official athletic department websites and Twitter. For department websites, 60 percent of respondents find the method effective but no media member described the method as very effective. Twitter was described as very effective or effective by 48 percent of the respondents, with 12 percent claiming it is very effective. Facebook was deemed effective by 12 percent of respondents, while Instagram, fax machines and other social media platforms received more votes of ‘ineffective’ than anything else.

Figure 1 shows a side-by-side comparison of how many SIDs always or occasionally use each distribution method, versus how many media members find each distribution method very effective or effective.

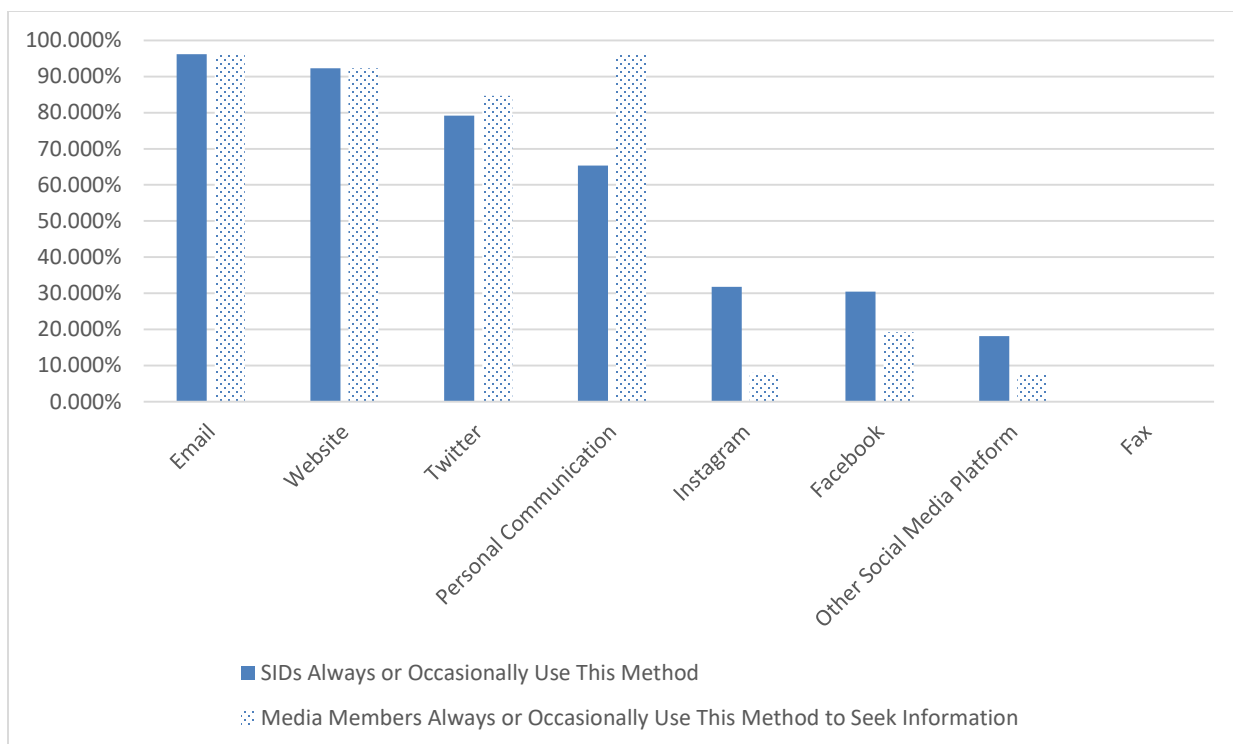


**Figure 1      Methods Used to Release Information**

### **How Information Is Sought**

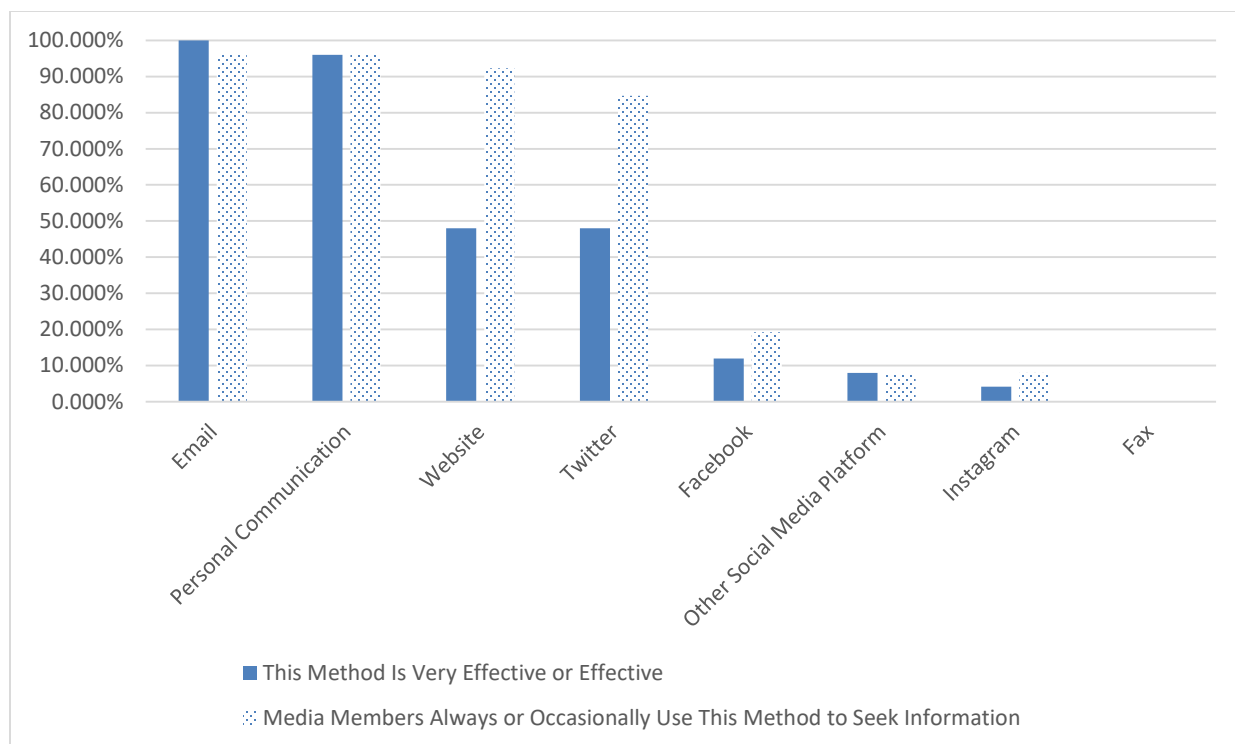
Participants were asked what frequency they use each communication method to seek information. The methods used most often by media members are personal communication, email and official athletic department websites. Email is used always or occasionally by 96.2 percent of respondents, personal communication is used always or occasionally by 96.2 percent of respondents, and 92.3 percent always or occasionally use athletic department websites. Personal communication was said to always be used by 76.9 percent of respondents, the only method always used by more than 50 percent of respondents. Twitter is the clear-cut fourth option, as 84.6 percent of respondents indicated always or occasionally using Twitter to seek information. According to survey results, 52 percent of respondents never seek information on Instagram, 34.6 percent never seek information on Facebook and 65.4 percent never seek information on other social media platforms.

Figure 2 shows a side-by-side comparison of how many SIDs always or occasionally use each distribution method, versus how many media members always or occasionally use the method to seek information.



**Figure 2      Frequency of Methods Used to Release vs Seek Information**

Figure 3 shows a side-by-side comparison of how many media members find each distribution method very effective or effective, versus how many media members always or occasionally use the method to seek information.



**Figure 3 Effectiveness of Methods Used to Seek vs Release Information**

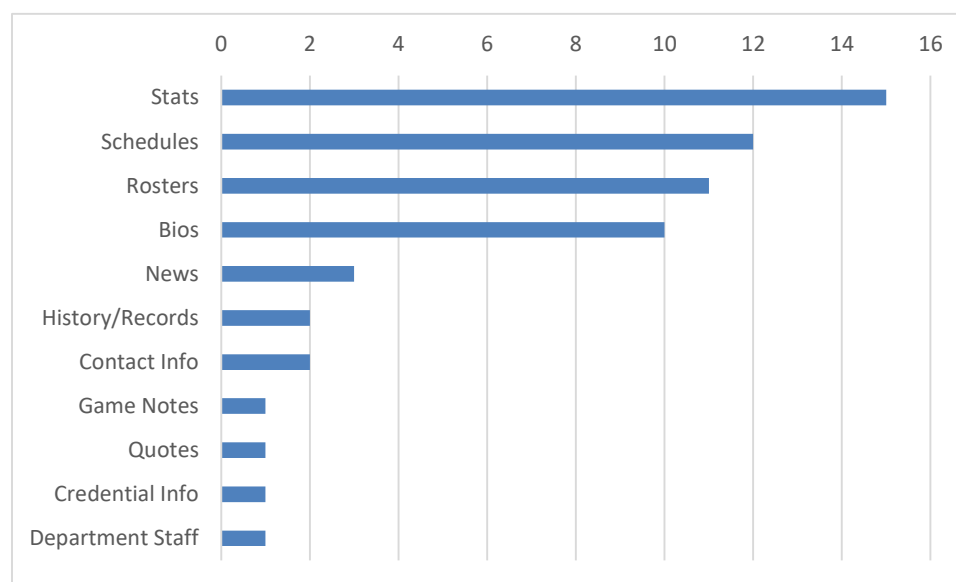
### **What is Sought on Official Athletic Department Websites?**

With 92.3 percent of respondents indicating they always or occasionally use official athletic department websites to seek information, a follow-up question took aim at what they were looking for on department websites. Of the 27 participants, 26 answered the open-ended question “which resources do you most often seek on athletic department websites?” Respondents gave answers varying from one word to five examples of information sought.

The most common resource sought on official athletic department websites was statistics, with 57.7 percent of respondents including it in their answer. Statistics was the only answer to appear on more than half of the surveys. The next three most common answers were schedules (46.1 percent), rosters (42.3 percent) and biographical information about student-athletes or coaches (38.5 percent). Seven more answers

received at least one mention: news (three), history and records (two), contract information (two), quotes (one), credential information (one) and staff directories (one).

Figure 4 shows the number of responses received for each piece of information media members revealed searching for on official athletic department websites.



**Figure 4 Information Sought on Department Websites**

### **Use and Effectiveness of Communication Tools**

Similar to participants being asked to measure the frequency and effectiveness of various distribution methods used by SIDs, media members were also asked to measure the frequency and effectiveness of five common communication tools used by SIDs. Participants were asked to rank the following communication tools in order of frequency and effectiveness: email, Facebook, fax, telephone and twitter. A response of “one” indicated the most frequent or effective and a response of “five” indicated the least frequent or effective.

Table 1 shows the mean score of the frequency with which SIDs use these communication tools. Email (1.04) was the most frequently used tool by a wide margin

over runner-up Twitter (2.38). Email was listed as the most frequently used communication tool of SIDs by 25 of the 26 respondents. Twitter received the other top vote, along with being listed second 14 times. Telephone was the third-most frequently used tool with a mean score of 2.81 and ranking in the top three on 20 of 26 responses. Facebook (3.85) and fax (4.92) were the least-used tools.

**Table 2      Frequency of SIDs' Use of Communication Tools**

| <b>Most Frequent</b> | <b>Mean</b> |
|----------------------|-------------|
| <b>Email</b>         | 1.04        |
| <b>Twitter</b>       | 2.38        |
| <b>Telephone</b>     | 2.81        |
| <b>Facebook</b>      | 3.85        |
| <b>Fax</b>           | 4.92        |

Table 2 shows the mean score of the effectiveness of the five communication tools used by SIDs, according to media members who completed the survey. Using the mean score, email (1.46) was also reportedly the most effective tool, barely edging out telephone (1.71). Email was listed as the top selection on 13 of 24 responses, while telephone was tabbed number one on the remaining 11. Email was among the top two choices on each of the 24 submissions. Telephone was in the top two on 21 of 24. Twitter received the three remaining second-place votes and the vast majority of third-place votes. Twitter ranked third for effectiveness with a mean score of 3.0. Facebook (3.92) and fax (4.92) were deemed the least effective of the five tools.

**Table 3      Effectiveness of SIDs' Use of Communication Tools**

| <b>Most Effective</b> | <b>Mean</b> |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| <b>Email</b>          | 1.46        |
| <b>Twitter</b>        | 3.00        |
| <b>Telephone</b>      | 1.71        |
| <b>Facebook</b>       | 3.92        |
| <b>Fax</b>            | 4.92        |



### Behavioral Traits of a High-Quality SID

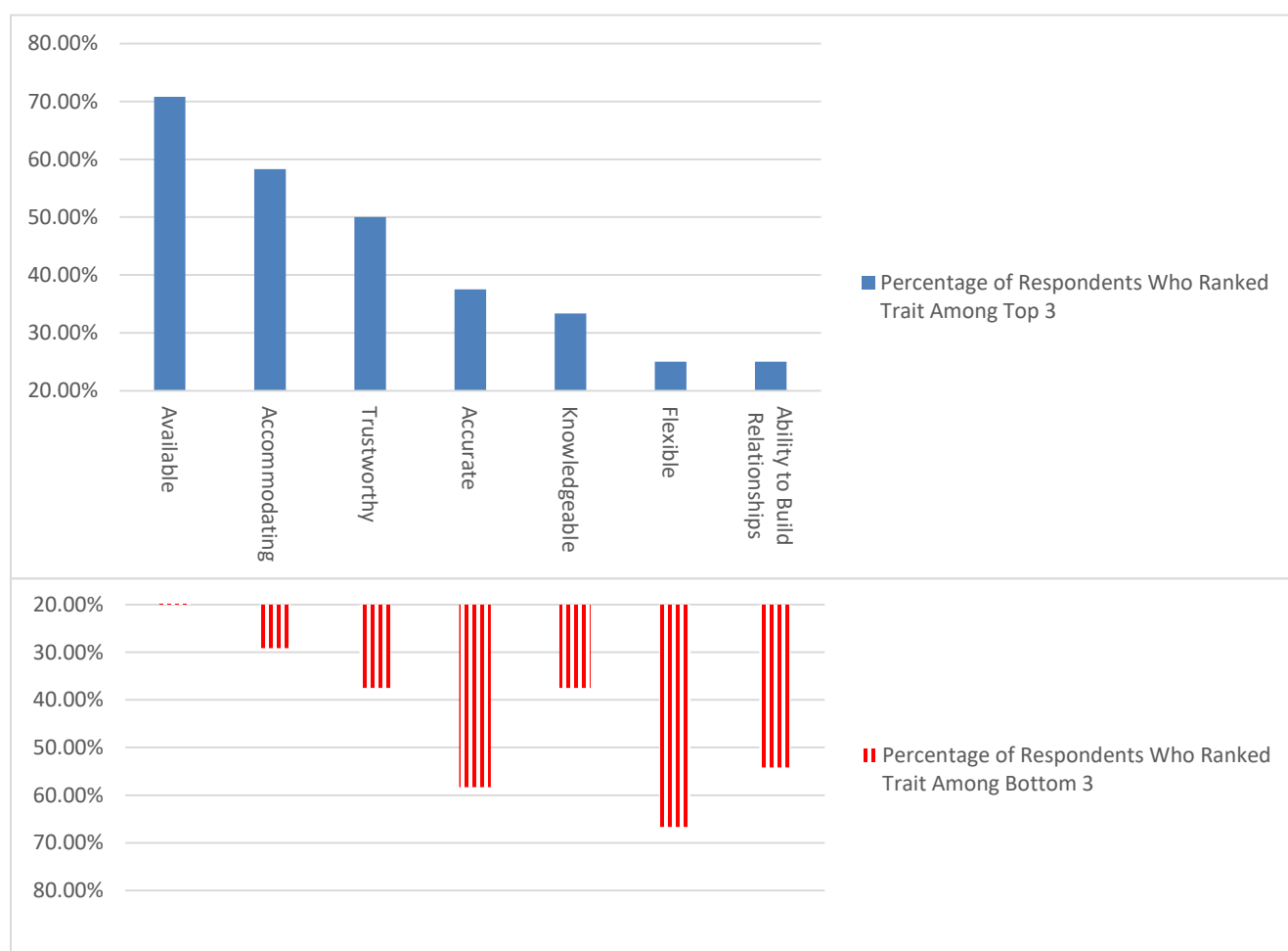
Survey participants were asked to rank seven behavioral traits of SIDs with whom they work on a regular basis from most important (one) to least important (seven). The seven traits were: ability to build relationships, accommodating, accurate, available, flexible, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. The question was answered in full by 24 participants. Every response was listed as the most important at least once, and five of the seven were listed as the least important at least once.

**Table 4      Importance of SID Behavioral traits**

| <b>Most Important Traits of an SID</b> | <b>Mean</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>Available</b>                       | 2.75        |
| <b>Accommodating</b>                   | 3.04        |
| <b>Knowledgeable</b>                   | 3.83        |
| <b>Trustworthy</b>                     | 4.00        |
| <b>Accurate</b>                        | 4.42        |
| <b>Ability to Build Relationships</b>  | 4.83        |
| <b>Flexible</b>                        | 5.13        |

Table 3 illustrates participants' rankings of the most important traits for SIDs. Using the mean, available (2.75) and accommodating (3.04) were the top two most important traits and the only two to never be listed as the least important. Available ranked among the top three responses on the most responses (70.83 percent) and among the bottom three responses on the fewest submissions (16.67 percent). The remaining behavioral traits, in order of most important according to mean score, were: knowledgeable (3.83), trustworthy (4.0), accurate (4.42), ability to build relationships (4.83) and flexible (5.13). The answer that varied the most was trustworthy, with a standard deviation of 2.2 and a variance of 4.83.

Figure 5 shows how often each of the seven traits ranked in the top three or the bottom three on a survey participant's ballot. The top graph shows the percentage of responses that included each trait in the top three most important behavioral traits. The bottom graph shows the percentage of responses that included each trait in the three least important traits.



**Figure 5 Behavioral traits Ranked in Top Three vs Bottom Three**

### **Most Important Job Function of an SID**

Respondents were asked to list the four most important job functions of an SID. Responses were received from 23 participants for this open-ended question. Four themes permeated the responses with media members identifying the following functions as the

most important: facilitating access and interviews; being available and responsive in a timely fashion; ensuring accurate and useful information is readily available and easy to consume; be an advocate for the media within the athletic department. The themes of facilitating access and providing accurate and useful information were the most common refrains. Each was mentioned in 13 of the 23 responses. Being available and responsive in a timely fashion was noted 12 times. Seven respondents listed being advocate of the media among their four most important functions of an SID.

### **Changes to the Industries**

Participants were asked to consider the considerable changes taking place in the industries of sports media and media relations. With those changes in mind, they were asked to list the one job function of an SID that has increased in importance the most and the one job function that has decreased in importance the most. All 27 participants provided a response for the job function that has increased in importance the most, while 23 provided a response for the job function that has decreased in importance the most.

The three most common responses for the job function which has increased in importance the most were: getting in the way of the media or being a gatekeeper; understanding new and emerging media and the different needs of the various forms of media; rapid responses in the age of a 24-hour news cycle.

The three most common responses for the job function which has decreased in importance the most were: distributing stats and game recap information; generating local coverage and interest for the school's marquee sports; producing printed materials such as media guides, game notes and weekly releases. More than half of respondents (52.2

percent) said distributing stats and recap information is the job function of an SID that has decreased in importance the most.

### **In Their Own Words**

The final question of the survey asked participants to explain, in a sentence or two, in their own words what makes someone a high-quality SID. Responses were received from 26 of the 27 participants. Themes that emerged were those of trust, availability, willingness to work with media to find common ground and create compelling content, having an understanding of the media's job and role, clear communication, accuracy, timeliness, honesty and fairness. The most common themes were a willingness to work with media to find common ground and create compelling content (69.2 percent) and having an understanding of the media's job and role (46.1 percent).

Many responses made mention of how things used to be and reflected on changes in the SID profession. Multiple participants remarked that the behavioral traits which made SIDs of yesteryear stand out are rare among those in the profession today as illustrated by this participant's comment, "The best SID I ever worked with was accommodating, suggested stories and was in personal contact with me. That doesn't happen anymore." Multiple survey participants hypothesized modern SIDs strive to serve as barriers between the media and the schools or programs they work with. One participant referred to this style of SID as taking on the role of "castle moat." As another respondent put it, the recent trend has seen SIDs transform from public-relations professionals to "marketers and fan-boys who see their roles as shielding coaches and being on the front lines of a never-ending adversarial relationship."

So what should the relationship entail? How can the SID-media member relationship be mutually beneficial? One reporter summed it up: “if you cannot trust an SID, nothing else matters.” Reading deeper into the answers, the majority of respondents called for SIDs to cultivate hands-on, personal relationships with media members. “They are prepared and take the time to make relationships with the media,” said one respondent. Another survey noted a SID’s ability to “help create compelling content by acting as an information conduit” as a desired trait. Further illustrating the want for personal relationships was a response saying “the very best SIDs are the ones who, when presented with an unusual idea, try to find ways to make it happen.”

Still, many respondents acknowledged the various directions SIDs can be pulled to satisfy their many constituents. “They have to balance the needs of the team with the media, which aren’t always the same,” one participant wrote. Another took it a step beyond acknowledgement and offered a suggestion: “A good SID needs to be able to push back at the right times, particularly when a coach is being obstinate to the point of hurting the school’s own PR efforts.”

Simply put, in the words of this media member, a high-quality SID “serves the needs of his or her employer without treating the media poorly.”

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine which behavioral traits and methods are associated with and used by high-quality SIDs, in the eyes of sports media members. An evaluation of the responses will assist in creating a framework from which sports information departments can draw an understanding of how these media members prefer to receive information and what behavioral traits they relate to high-quality SIDs.

As Dittmore (2017) surmised in his article directed to professionals in college athletics, “the more I consider the variety of unit names in my 40 school sample, the more I believe it is evidence athletic departments are struggling with how to structure communications functions. No singular ‘best practice’ exists, and it may never exist” (para. 24). He goes on to acknowledge the wide array of variables in play across the country: “Each school, its market, and its fan base are different. More audiences than the mainstream media exist for the content these units produce – alumni, boosters, recruits, sponsors” (para. 24).

A one-size-fits-all approach to the communications arm of a collegiate athletics department may not exist. It may be in the best interest of one school to focus more on directly reaching its boosters and for another school to concentrate on directly reaching recruits. How and where a department decides to direct its communications efforts may vary, but all SIDs will spend some amount of their time working with media outlets. The results of this study help provide a road map for how to efficiently and effectively create a mutually-beneficial relationship between the athletic department and members of the

media. The discussion includes recommendations for best practices and philosophies based on the results of survey responses from media members throughout the country. This survey and its findings begin to offer the substance needed in order to have the discussion Humenik lobbied for years ago. In his 2008 interview with Stoldt, Humenik stated that SIDs and other members of the communications staff in athletic departments must be thought of in a strategic role, rather than simply a practitioner. He went on to say it is the responsibility of the communications staff to demonstrate the importance of adapting to the current and changing state of communications in order for the athletic department to be successful. Humenik proclaimed, "If you have a clear proactive plan and vision, and focus your decision making on it, you can make significant progress with regard to your goals and ambitions" (Stoldt, 2008). The results of this study offer a plan on which SIDs can focus their decision-making when it comes to working with media members, developing a mutually-beneficial relationship for their athletic department, and implementing communications and social media plans.

### **Straight A's**

When media members were asked to put in their own words the most important job functions of an SID and to explain what makes a high-quality SID, four clear themes emerged. From those themes was born a philosophy for successful SIDs and media relations professionals: "Straight A's in Media Relations: Access, Accuracy, Availability and Advocacy." The four themes that emerged out of the open-ended responses varied only slightly from the top responses when participants were asked to rank seven predetermined behavioral traits in order of importance for an SID.

Of the 23 respondents who offered their perspective on the important job functions of an SID, 13 mentioned someone who provides or facilitates access to key figures within the department. “A good SID understands the role of the press and respects the difference between the two jobs and facilitates as much access to players and coaches as possible,” said one surveyed media member. Another respondent listed the four most important behavioral traits as “provide access, provide access, provide access, provide access.” A reporter's work is only as good as the access he or she is granted: access to information (e.g. updated biographical information for coaches and student-athletes, updated statistics, insight from an in-tune SID to find worthwhile storylines, etc.), access to interviews (e.g. one-on-one interview opportunities, wide variety of interviewees, etc.) and access to people (e.g. being exposed to the human side of coaches and student-athletes, having off-the-record conversations to build relationships, etc.).

A common refrain from survey participants was that in recent years SIDs have strayed from the idea of media relations or media services and taken on a role of “gatekeeper” or “castle moat” between the media and the programs within their athletic departments. One participant alluded to this concern when he offered a rather all-encompassing explanation of what makes someone a high-quality SID. He referred to it as “the ability to spark a story idea and to encourage and provide regular and timely access to the coaches and players, without hovering or influencing interviews. Also, the ability to keep reporters in the loop about things that may happen down the road.”

Accuracy was referenced as a trait of a high-quality SID by 13 of the 23 respondents. There is no easier way to lose the all-important trust of any constituent than inaccuracy. If media members, coaches, student-athletes or fans cannot trust the



information, they likely will not trust the SID responsible for the information. Everything that funnels from the athletic department to the media and general public needs to be accurate in order to convey strong and meaningful messaging. Even in the departments where the SID role is morphing into a more dynamic strategic communications position, the SIDs are still responsible for the statistics, schedules and biographies, among other informational collateral, and it all needs to be accurate. The best way for those technical but necessary tasks to not eat into time devoted to strategic communications is for the statistics and information to be right the first time and not require additional time spent making corrections. Accuracy needs to be a standard and an expectation.

Availability was mentioned 12 times among the 23 responses to how media members describe a high-quality SID. Availability was also ranked highest by the same respondents in an earlier question that asked participants to rank the importance of seven common behavioral traits associated with the SID profession. A handful of the responses to mention availability spoke to the current digital age of journalism that works on a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week news cycle and requires a lot of attentiveness out of a media relations staff. One survey participant stated a high-quality SID is “a strong communicator who understands the demands of today’s sports editors in a digital world. Deadlines are now ASAP for us. Good or bad, help us get the information we need.” It used to be the case that there was a time news stopped for the day. An actual deadline. The last local newscast went off the air at 11 p.m., or the newspapers went to press at 11:30 p.m. There is no real deadline any more. But perhaps more important than being available around the clock, or being on call at all hours of the day is that news develops throughout the day online rather than first appearing in tomorrow's newspaper. When

necessary, the ability to offer swift, yet complete, concise and well-crafted responses is invaluable to reporters and editors with deadlines that are now instantaneous for online content.

Availability means being there in good times and in bad. One respondent clarified this point by stating “(another) thing that separates average SIDs from the best ones – disclosure. If there is a negative story involving a SIDs team, the best ones will respond to media requests cooperatively and as actively as they would a positive story...The average ones go silent.” This particular example may be the best illustration of all four elements of the Straight A’s working together – being in a position to carry out that delicate conversation takes a lot of groundwork on advocating for the media.

The concept of advocacy was mentioned seven times among the survey participants who offered their own description of a high-quality SID. One of the unique roles of an SID within the athletic department is the need to be bipartisan. SIDs serve their student-athletes, coaches and administration, while almost equally serving the media. A quality media relations director is willing and able to stand up for the media and help make their jobs possible.

As discussed in the importance of access, a number of survey participants mentioned negative aspects of SIDs with whom they work, and a recurring response was to lament the increased role SIDs play as a gatekeeper. Many of the same respondents said the best SIDs work both sides of the relationships between reporters and coaches, student-athletes or school officials. Many responses pointed to the ability of an SID to advocate to department staff on behalf of media members as a sign of a high-quality SID. Advocating on behalf of media members also carries great potential to be beneficial for

the SID and the department's communications goals. "It is important for (SIDs) not to kowtow to coaches; a good SID needs to be able to push back at the right times, particularly when a coach is being obstinate to the point of hurting the school's own PR efforts," explained one survey participant. Encouraging an obstinate coach to take a different view on media opportunities can help the department's external efforts. Helping coaches understand there is plenty for them and their programs to gain from a relationship with the media helps everyone. Another respondent concluded "a good SID can help schools by building mutually beneficial relationships. That seems to happen now only in a few, very rare cases. The SID, unfortunately, has become more of an obstacle."

Trust is the string that ties the Straight A's together. Trust was mentioned explicitly by five respondents when offering their own opinion of what makes a high-quality SID. As one respondent said, "If you cannot trust an SID, nothing else matters." Trustworthiness was among the seven behavioral traits media members were asked to rank in order of importance in an SID. It was ranked fourth, with half of the respondents considering it one of the top three traits. The importance of trustworthiness in an SID is illustrated in its impact on the Straight A's. The trust of a media member can be gained through granting access, being accurate, being available and being an advocate.

In my experience, the benefits of this philosophy come to bear in practical, real-life situations for an SID on a weekly, if not daily, basis. A typical scenario that sees all four Straight A's work in unison is when a media member and SID work together to develop a story idea for the reporter. An SID who makes him or herself available to the reporter has an opportunity to suggest a high-quality, on-message story for that media outlet's consumers. The value of any pitched story lies in its accuracy and the access that

can be afforded to the reporter. Accuracy once again speaks for itself in this scenario. A falsified or sensationalized story is a tough way to build a reporter's trust. The access to interviews and inside information is facilitated by the SID and must be delivered for the story to reach its potential. Oftentimes the most impactful and relatable stories are also the most personal. In order to provide the level of access for a reporter to properly tell a quality story, this often requires an SID to advocate on behalf of the media. Advocating for the value of spreading the program or department's message through the media in general and advocating for specific stories to be told and for individual reporters to be granted the ability to tell those stories.

The Straight A's can be used as an evaluative framework for SID offices. If the department's message or stories are not reaching traditional media outlets, SIDs and their supervisors can use the Straight A's as a resource to determine if the correct tools and methods are being used to reach media members and their outlets. Any department that deems traditional and emerging media outlets among their most important external audiences would do well to evaluate the existing relationships between the SIDs and media members. This emphasis on interpersonal relationships has also been recognized as worthwhile for public relations practitioners in their work with journalists (Water, et al., 2010). Focusing on the Straight A's will help create a mutually-beneficial partnership between SIDs and reporters. Placing a priority on these relationships will also allow SIDs to serve as strategists and advisors within athletic departments, combating the issue of not having "a seat at the table," as described in CoSIDA's Strategic Plan (2008). The issue of not having a seat at the table is a concern throughout the public relations profession. Berger and Reber's study (2006), which surveyed athletic directors and other athletics

administrators, determined public relations professionals do not serve as advisors, but more often simply as publicists or in-house journalists. Berger and Reber indicated the lack of influence is due to “organizational leaders who just don’t get it and professionals who just don’t have it” (p. 2).

When respondents were asked to rank seven specific behavioral traits in order of most importance, the top four answers were available, accommodating, knowledgeable and trustworthy. The Straight A’s philosophy incorporates many of the same ideals, while also allowing survey participants to define and construct what they consider to be the traits and functions of SIDs through open-ended questions. The survey, which was created in part by a panel of experts from within the SID field, did not include advocacy as one of the behavioral traits to be ranked by respondents. Nearly a third of the participants mentioned it unprompted, indicating a potential disconnect between internal and external views of an SID’s role.

Allowing respondents the opportunity to help define the behavioral traits and functions of the position was beneficial in highlighting some of the mismatches in what SIDs or athletic directors and other administrators think SIDs are doing or should be doing, versus what the media deems necessary. The bipartisanship of the SID role lends significant credence to the media’s opinion on the matter. An SID is asked to balance serving their programs and serving the media. Understanding how media members prefer to work with SIDs is a critical step toward building a mutually-beneficial relationship.

### **Disparities in Distribution Methods**

This study shows a disparity between how SIDs most frequently distribute information, how media members seek information, and the perceived effectiveness of

each distribution method from the perspective of the media. In short, the survey results suggest SIDs prefer mass distribution methods and tools at the expense of effectiveness.

With regards to methods SIDs use to distribute information on a regular basis, the survey results distinguished two clearly superior methods in terms of effectiveness. The reporters surveyed for this study noted email and personal communication as the runaway favorites of SIDs. While email is the most used and most effective, stark contrasts occur in the perceived use and effectiveness of releasing information through personal communication, as well as official athletic websites and Twitter. Personal communication received the most responses of ‘very effective’ at 84 percent; however, only 19.2 percent of SIDs were noted to always use that method for sharing information with the media. Respondents said 92.3 percent of SIDs always or occasionally use the athletic department’s official website to release information – a method that 60 percent of respondents found effective – yet no media member described the method as very effective. When it comes to Twitter, respondents said 79.2 percent of SIDs they work with either always or occasionally use the platform to release information. Only 12 percent of respondents said Twitter was very effective and more than half described it as ineffective or somewhat effective.

The disconnect grows when comparing the methods media members claim to use when seeking information. Survey results suggest media members have grown to accept information will be released via official athletic websites and Twitter despite their personal opinions about the effectiveness of those methods. Athletic department websites are used always or occasionally by 92.3 percent of respondents, while Twitter is used always or occasionally by 84.6 percent of respondents with 42.3 percent claiming to

always use Twitter. The same cannot be said for Instagram, Facebook or other social media platforms. For the 31.8 percent, 30.4 percent and 18.1 percent of SIDs releasing information using these methods, respectively, that information is going unseen by a large segment of media members as the vast majority of respondents indicated rarely or never using those methods to seek information. Media members continue to seek information through personal communication, with 96.1 percent of respondents indicating they always or occasionally use the method. The results show overwhelming evidence that media members want to receive information through personal communication. Nearly every reporter uses the method to seek out information and it was deemed the most effective communication method, yet 65.4 percent of SIDs with whom the respondents work use personal communication always or occasionally.

The same trend was seen in how survey participants perceived use and effectiveness of communication tools employed by SIDs. Email was said to be the most-frequently used tool and the most effective. Again, the discrepancy was in the disproportionate use of telephones and Twitter compared to the effectiveness of those tools. Telephones were said to be used less often than Twitter and far less than email, but narrowly less effective than email and significantly more effective than Twitter.

Personal communication takes time –something no SID thinks they have an abundance of –but when made a part of a communication strategy can go a long way toward earning additional or positive coverage (Botan and Hazleton, 2010). This type of communication can come in many forms, from helping a media member to break a story, to following up on a widely-distributed news release with individual phone calls or text messages, to answering questions or offering additional information in a calculated

fashion. All of those cases can be part of the greater strategy of how best to reach your audience with your message.

Speaking of reaching audiences, the same must be kept in mind for Twitter and official athletic department websites. The media may not deem those platforms as effective communication tools, but those vehicles are reaching intended audiences such as fans, boosters and recruits, even if not the media. According to a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center, nearly 70 percent of all adults in the U.S. are active on Facebook. The same study determined nearly 60 percent of U.S. adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are active on Instagram (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2017). The questions each SID office and athletic department need to ask themselves include where are resources best dedicated? Does the local newspaper (print and online) have a significantly greater reach than the department's website? Is there a particular demographic best reached by Twitter or Facebook that is worthy of spending more time on, even if the total numbers are lower? Results from this survey indicate that, from the standpoint of reaching the media, information distributed on Twitter will likely be seen but is not guaranteed to be an effective way of sharing a school's message with the media. Information distributed on Facebook or other social media sites is unlikely to be sought out by media members.

### **The Case for Facebook and Instagram**

Much of the discussion surrounding social media with regard to this study concluded that Facebook and Instagram, specifically, were used by SIDs more often than was warranted by media members' perceived effectiveness of those platforms. In spite of that, a place exists for those outlets in a department's communication strategy as a way to engage with other constituencies (e.g. recruits, donors, etc.). How SIDs as a whole can



situate themselves within the industry's hierarchy throughout the coming months and years may determine how much of a role the SID position will play in the implementation of those plans when it comes to Facebook and Instagram. This study comes at a time when many athletic departments are rethinking how to structure their external communications efforts. Many schools have begun to rebrand their media relations and SID offices (Dittmore, 2017). Dittmore explained, "The growing usage of 'Strategic Communications,' coupled with 'External' titles suggests athletic directors recognize a need to bring together the multiple internal units which aid in dissemination of news and information" (para. 20). Only two of the 40 schools he researched still use the traditional title of SID for the senior-most communications staff member.

Dittmore's assertion falls in line with anecdotal evidence from two public institutions in the state, Boise State University and the University of Idaho. Both athletic departments are making efforts to more closely align their external departments. A motto used by leaders in both departments is "breaking down the silos" of sports information, marketing, development, tickets and video to work together and create a more cohesive communication plan. This movement provides an opportunity for SIDs to position themselves as the communications professionals within an athletic department. Each external area of an athletic department has its own constituent group, its own preferred communications tools and its own methodologies for what messages to deliver and how to deliver them. For some of these areas, the best outlets are Facebook and Instagram.

Every current job posting on CoSIDA's website list strong or excellent written and/or verbal communication skills among the required qualifications. SIDs are trained communicators and likely rank among the most qualified people in any athletic

department to craft messages for any communication platform, whether it is to be consumed by media, fans, recruits or any other constituent group. The skillset of SIDs allows them to serve in any number of capacities within a department, including copywriter, editor and strategist for communication pieces with any intended audience. Further research into the demographics and consumption habits of stakeholders outside of the media can help SIDs develop communications plans and strategies for all areas of a department.

If athletic directors and other leaders are looking to a wide cross-section of externally-focused staff members to choose one to lead its communications effort, the SID industry needs to capitalize on the chance to prove its abilities and value. Further research, enhanced professional development, and well-devised plans can serve the purpose of advancing the profession in accordance with CoSIDA's strategic plan, as well as advancing individuals within the profession as more broad communications positions become the norm across the industry. If traditional SIDs can morph into the communications leaders of a department and be more directly tied to the messaging that targets ticket purchasers and boosters, therein lies a much more direct route to quantifying the value of the position, rather than developing a method to place a value on the amount of exposure generated by working solely with traditional media outlets. Instead, the work of SIDs with traditional media outlets can be coupled with the SIDs' responsibilities related to messaging that may currently be seen as a marketing or development function. If quantifying the value of an SID is the primary goal of CoSIDA and its current strategic plan, the most realistic route to success may be through

redefining the position rather than trying to shape the narrative around an existing definition of what an SID provides for his or her department.

### **Implications**

This study was designed for the purpose of defining high-quality SIDs according to the perspectives of media contacts and exploring disparities between common practices of SIDs and methods preferred by those media members. The results of this study provides a road map for current and future SIDs and media relations professionals in other industries by first providing an organizing philosophy of “Straight A’s in Media Relations: Accessibility, Accuracy, Availability, and Advocacy.” This philosophy reflects an integration of recognized SID behavioral traits and job functions, together with essential insights from the SIDs’ primary work partners: sports television and newspaper reporters. The “Straight A’s” should be incorporated into curriculum for sports administration programs in higher education and professional development training sessions in order to share these perspectives. The findings regarding media members’ use of new and emerging communication tools in comparison to the habits of SIDs using those tools offers an opportunity to devise a plan of action based on data. In that regard, this study serves as a contribution and small step toward one of the primary objectives of the CoSIDA Strategic Plan, which is to bolster the scholarly research and knowledge base related to sports information.

The opportunity to set plans for how best to reach one or more of a department’s various constituent groups speaks to what Humenik believes is a chance for SIDs to distinguish themselves in the age of social media. Humenik said the communications-based evolution we are living through provides SIDs with a great opportunity to change

the way sports PR and communications are viewed and evaluated, especially by senior administration (Stoldt, 2008):

It is exciting for our industry and profession to be right in the middle of the greatest communications evolution in history. There is no question that 'managing' all of this is much more complicated than it used to be...this situation provides us with a meaningful opportunity to become leaders and architects in these discussions instead of mechanics and to thus demonstrate value and the impact of strategic thinking (Stoldt, 2008).

This research provides a direction forward for those in the SID profession who recognize the need to assert themselves as the communications professionals of the department and help establish a strategy for how to disseminate all of the various messages intended for multiple audiences.

### **Future Studies**

This study was among the first of its kind, and certainly the first in recent years. As methods of communication continue to evolve, research questions will need to follow suite. One of the delimitations of this study was that participants were drawn from media members from 10 of the largest markets in the country. National outlets and small-to-medium markets were not included in the survey. The best practices for SIDs working with those groups may be different than what is recommended based on the findings of this study. Future research in this area could also feature other participants including on-air talent and production crews working for various television partners that regularly broadcast collegiate athletic events, and athletic directors and other staff within athletics departments, including coaches and administrators.

Beyond best practices, future studies should examine how effective communications efforts impact (1) visibility and (2) public opinion. Finding a way to quantify the value of communication is a significant research consideration and a goal

stated nearly a decade ago by CoSIDA's Humenik: "I think anything that can be taught that will help people who want to get into sports communications develop ways to 'define value' in the context of the college athletics enterprise would be a huge advancement for those of us in the industry" (Stoldt, 2008, p. 464). Finding a way to quantify the value of an effective communications department is what can help earn SIDs that coveted seat at the table.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Survey**

*Before completing this survey, please take a moment to reflect on the qualities of the SIDs you work with regularly and then tailor your survey responses to reflect the SIDs that you consider to be of the highest quality.*

### **Demographic Information**

Position Title: (Sports editor, sports director, sports reporter)

Years in Field:

Age: (21-25, 26-30 ,31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 60+)

Sex: (male, female)

Undergraduate degree field: (journalism, public relations, advertising, business, general studies, other)

SIDs with whom I communicate on a regular basis release information in the following way(s):

|                         | Always | Occasionally | Rarely | Never |
|-------------------------|--------|--------------|--------|-------|
| Athletic dept. websites |        |              |        |       |
| Email                   |        |              |        |       |
| Fax                     |        |              |        |       |
| Personal Communication  |        |              |        |       |
| Twitter                 |        |              |        |       |
| Facebook                |        |              |        |       |
| Instagram               |        |              |        |       |
| Other social media site |        |              |        |       |

How effective is each of the following methods SIDs use to release information?

|                         | Always | Occasionally | Rarely | Never | N/A (not used) |
|-------------------------|--------|--------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| Athletic dept. websites |        |              |        |       |                |
| Email                   |        |              |        |       |                |
| Fax                     |        |              |        |       |                |
| Personal Communication  |        |              |        |       |                |
| Twitter                 |        |              |        |       |                |
| Facebook                |        |              |        |       |                |
| Instagram               |        |              |        |       |                |
| Other social media site |        |              |        |       |                |

How often do you personally use the following methods to obtain information?

|                         | Always | Occasionally | Rarely | Never |
|-------------------------|--------|--------------|--------|-------|
| Athletic dept. websites |        |              |        |       |
| Personal Communication  |        |              |        |       |
| Twitter                 |        |              |        |       |
| Facebook                |        |              |        |       |
| Instagram               |        |              |        |       |
| Other social media site |        |              |        |       |

If you use athletic department websites...

Which resources do you most often seek on athletic department websites?

Rank the distribution methods used by SIDs in order of the most frequent communication

(1=most frequent, 5=least frequent).

\_\_E-mail

\_\_Telephone

\_\_Fax

\_\_Twitter

\_\_Facebook

Rank the distribution methods used by SIDs in order of the most effective

communication (1=most effective, 5=least effective):

\_\_E-mail

\_\_Telephone

\_\_Fax

\_\_Twitter

\_\_Facebook

Rank the following behavioral traits for an SID in order of importance (1=most important):

\_\_Available

\_\_Knowledgeable

\_\_Flexible

\_\_Accurate

\_\_Accommodating

\_\_Trustworthy

\_\_Ability to Build Relationships

Considering recent changes to the communication field brought on by technological advances, please list the one job function of SIDs that best answers the following questions.

-Which job function of an SID has increased in importance the most?

-Which job function of an SID has decreased in importance the most?

Please list the four most important functions of an SID.

In a sentence or two, please explain in your own words what makes someone a high-quality SID?